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Framing Matters

Perspectives on Negotiation Research and Practice in Communication

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Chapter 11

Competing Claims in Public Space: The Construction of Frames in Different Relational Contexts

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Introduction

In recent years, Dutch newspapers have regularly been reporting on conflicts in public places. In many cases, youngsters are involved in such conflicts, and in some cases these youths are of Moroccan background. Different measures have been tried out to correct the public behavior of the youngsters, such as organizing a "no flocking together" policy as well as a "no smoking marihuana in public places" policy at high-risk hotspots, the introduction of a constant whistle with a horrible sound that can only be heard by young people, or involving so-called neighborhood fathers who may know how to handle the boys. However, to date these measures do not seem to have had much effect.

The case-study presented in this chapter recounts an ongoing conflict between youngsters of Moroccan background and neighbors at a public square in a large city in the Netherlands. The study deals with the question of how both parties frame the conflict and how they legitimize these frames in interaction. More specifically, we examine different interaction settings: bilateral interviews, a "we-group" consisting of either youngsters or neighbors, and a group of both youngsters and neighbors to analyze how individuals construct and legitimize these different frames.

Former research shows that different groups of people use public space for different ends that are not always compatible (Lieberg, 1995; Van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008). In addition, the accessibility of public space is decreasing because formal rules increasingly allow for only selected use of specific places, and public space is more and more reserved for private ends. Examples are the rapidly increasing numbers of parking lots and the increasing numbers of so-called gated communities that are characterized by restricted accessibility for the people who live in such areas. As a result, public space—at least in the Netherlands—has become a scarce good, the borders of which are constantly negotiated in interaction. Within this context, studying the way the use of public space is negotiated in interaction becomes relevant.

This study is part of the so-called Boundaries of Space research program, financed by Wageningen University, the Netherlands. This program is designed to investigate the effects of changes in society and in public administration on spatial planning. Such changes are caused by today's dominant trends, such as individualization, privatization, deregulation, and increased market orientation, as well as decentralization, Europeanization, and globalization. Linked to these trends, new forms of self-organization of people emerge, varying from open networks to closed communities (Aarts & During, 2006).

Analytical Framework

The starting point for this research is the idea that reality is constructed in, through, and by conversations and discourse (Frake, 1977; Ford, 1999; Te Molder & Potter, 2005). At the most basic level, conversations are "what is said and listened to" between people (Ford, 1999). Not only are conversations the process through which reality is constructed, they are also the product of that construction. As Ford argues: "Conversations bring both history and future into the present utterance by responding to, reaccentuating, and reworking past conversations while anticipating and shaping subsequent conversations" (Ford, 1999: 484). Analyzing conversations thus gives insight into the way people experience the conflict at stake, as well as into the way the conflict is constructed in different conversation contexts. Since theories of framing are very well in line with this fundamental starting point we chose the framing concept as the basis for our analytical framework.

The concept of frames is used to understand the rules that govern our appreciation of our world and enable us to differentiate between different sorts of reality (see Goffman, 1974). Framing has to do with making sense, interpreting, and giving meaning to what is happening in the ongoing world. We approach framing not only as an (inter)active, but also as a dynamic, way of acting.

Although not always consciously, but nevertheless actively, people construct specific frames in interaction. As Entman (1993: 52) puts it: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." By framing events, developments, and/or phenomena in interaction, people are doing something or, in other words, become active agents (Frake, 1977).

Out of innumerable possible descriptions in our conversations, we choose specific descriptions of reality in order to accomplish goals through interaction

in a specific context. Examples of such goals are accusing people, complimenting people, entertaining people, shifting responsibility, constructing credibility, constructing a desired identity, realizing a specific interest, etcetera. Generally speaking, such goals have to do with influencing the content, the interaction process, and/or the relationship with the actor(s) involved (Dewulf et al., 2009; see also Chapter 1).

We create frames "by sorting and categorizing our experiences—weighing new information against our previous interpretations" (Gray, 2003: 12). Through this process, we focus our attention on an event or issue by "imparting meaning and significance to elements within the frame and setting them apart from what is outside the frame" (Buechler, 2000: 41). The opposite is also true: The frames that we construct while interacting depend on the context in which we find ourselves. In this study, the relational context in which the interaction takes place (Who is present at the conversation?) is of special importance.

An important aspect of our approach to frames is that these are not static; rather, they are continuously (re)constructed. The choice of a certain frame depends not only on the goals of the people in the interaction, but also on the cues given by others involved in the interaction, as also the repertoire of frames that is already present (Bateson, 1972; Gray, 2003). Frames are iterative: they determine the interaction and are formed *in* the interaction by experiences, expectancies and goals that are considered by the people at that very instant (Aarts & van Woerkum, 2006).

Gray (2003) distinguishes different frames that help to understand the dynamics in conflicts. In our research, we analyzed *problem* frames, *identity* frames, *characterization* frames, and *power* frames. Problem frames refer to the issue at stake and are constructed to define what the problem is about, including causes and solutions. Identity frames are statements of one's own identity in relation to the problem or the conflict at stake. Characterization frames are statements of "the other," which may be a person or a specific group (Gray, 2003). Identity and characterization frames are created to place oneself or the group in a wider social context. These frames implicitly or explicitly define how an individual or group sees itself in relation to others. Power frames are statements of the ability to influence the situation, both one's own and others' ability.

To understand the conflict, it is important to take identity frames, characterization frames, and power frames into account because conflict almost inevitably arises when people feel that their identities are being threatened (Blok, 2001). Identities are constantly negotiated in the presence of others and thus in interaction. Furthermore, as different studies have shown, hanging out at public spaces, displaying a certain style, has an important function for youngsters in relation to the development of their identities. Finally, it is one

of the objectives of our research to find out whether different relational contexts have an impact on the frames deployed by the actors involved. Therefore, these relationship frames are at the core of our study.

The Research

To analyze frame construction in interaction, we have chosen an ethnography-based approach. Data have been collected in researcher-organized conversations with stakeholders. In general, conversations offer a rich source of data that provide access to how people account for both their troubles and their good fortune (Silverman, 2001).We studied problem, identity, characterization, and power frames that stakeholders deployed in different conversational contexts by analyzing seven bilateral conversations between the researchers and individual youngsters (three) or neighbors (four), two conversations with we-groups (one consisting of three youngsters and one consisting of three neighbors), and one conversation with both youngsters (four) and neighbors (five). All conversations took at least one hour and were audio-taped and transcribed. With the help of predetermined themes (the conflict, the causes, preferred solutions, roles of actors involved), the conversations were more or less structured beforehand. To interpret the data, we used notions and techniques from discursive psychology. Discursive psychologists study "how people ordinarily, as part of everyday activities, report and explain actions and events, how they characterize the actors in those events, and how they manage various implications generated in the act of reporting" (Edwards & Potter, 2005: 241).

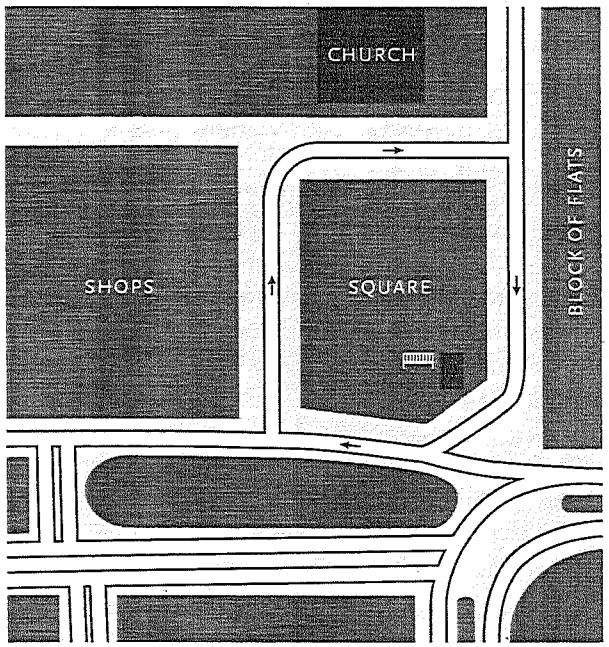
Our aim is not to determine how many people have certain frames and which people deploy those frames. Rather, we aim at gaining insight into how frames concerning the conflict at stake are constructed and presented in interaction, what these frames teach us with respect to possibilities for solving the problem, and which new questions arise.

The Setting

In a public square in a big city in the Netherlands, a conflict exists between a group of youngsters who meet at the square, and the neighbors who live at or near the square and who feel uncomfortable with the presence and behavior of the youngsters at the square. The square is enclosed by shops with apartments overhead on one side, a Catholic church on another side, and a block of flats on the third side. The square is actually a lawn on which a bench can be found, as well as a monument to the memory of the victims of the Second World War. There is a one-way-street system around the square. On the fourth side of the square, the traffic situation is rather complex with separate bus

lanes, traffic lights, a bus stop, zebra crossings, normal traffic lanes, sidewalks, and bicycle lanes (see Figure 11.1) .

Figure 11.1: The square.



The conflicting parties are the neighbors, who live on and around the square, and the youngsters, who meet at the square. The youngsters consist of several groups comprised of boys of Moroccan background, born and raised in the Netherlands. The boys are aged between eight and twenty-five years. The groups differ in their presence on the square and in how much trouble people feel that they cause. The neighbors are mainly Dutch people, many of whom are retired. Most of them have lived in the neighborhood all their lives and have experienced nuisance caused by the youngsters to varying extents over approximately the last ten years.

The municipality addresses the conflict structurally at different levels. Recently, two neighborhood police officers were appointed, one of them with special responsibility for the youths in the area. Besides these two officers, members of different police teams regularly oversee the area. The neighborhood has access to a community worker and a youth worker who work for social organizations that look after the well-being of the neighbors. Two

municipal employees are involved. Indirectly, the responsible city councilor plays a role on the administrative level.

Framing the Problem

The Neighbors. The neighbors that were interviewed all frame the problem as nuisance. They talk about trash, urination, car theft, threats, burglary, drugs-selling, etc. For some of the neighbors, the main problem is their feeling of insecurity, caused by the constant nuisance. They say that they feel intimidated by the number of boys hanging out at the corner, and by the behavior of these boys. A woman, for instance, articulates the problem as follows:

> ...the windows are spit at, the monuments are pissed on. It's one big trouble. And if there is a wedding: the brides come out of the church and car windscreens are smashed in, by boys only seven years old. And if you talk to them about their conduct, the next day you'll have a brick through your windows...We are simply being threatened here on this square.

Another woman emphasizes the impudence of the boys in the next statement:

> Yeah, there was a boy, my husband saw him breaking into a car in the middle of the day. My husband went downstairs and told the car owner: your laptop has been stolen. The man says: that is not possible, I am just standing here. He stood at the back of the car and at the same time they broke in at the front.

In both testimonies, problem frames (nuisance and impudence) are described concretely and precisely. Taking a closer look allows us to find identity and characterization frames that add to the seriousness of the problem. The phrase *And if you talk to them about their conduct, the next day you'll have a brick through your windows...* suggests that the neighbors consider themselves as reasonable beings (*if you talk to them about their conduct*) whereas the boys are characterized as unreasonable and violent (*the next day you'll have a brick through your window*). In the second example, the boys are characterized as extremely impudent (*He stood at the back of the car and at the same time they broke in at the front*).

To explain the perceived behavior of the boys, neighbors mention different causes at different levels, associated with specific solutions. Several neighbors emphasize that the police officers do not do their work very effectively. In the eyes of the neighbors, the police are too kind to the youngsters. The result is a *complete lack of credibility among the youngsters*. The neighbors have the impression that the problem is escalating because of a growing lack of social control on the part of the parents. The number of immigrants in the

neighborhood has increased and, according to the neighbors, these people *don't go anywhere and talk with nobody*.

Another important cause raised by the neighbors is the design of the square. The square is described as dark and cluttered, and this, according to the neighbors, makes the square attractive for (criminal) boys to hang out. What is more, there are several good avenues of escape when the police show up.

Besides the solution of redesigning the square, the neighbors frequently mentioned that an indoor place for the boys would be very welcome so that they would not need to hang out at the square anymore.

In addition to causes at the level of the square, the problem is considered at higher and more general levels. On the one hand, the cultural aspect is emphasized, as is the case in the next instances:

> At their homes, in most cases it is not very cozy. They are used to amusing themselves in the streets.

And:

> Yeah, Moroccan people meet in the street, this is part of their culture. Probably they meet in the street in their own country as well, and they stay in groups, always looking for each other.

On the other hand, the general problem of high unemployment among Moroccan youngsters in the Netherlands is mentioned. Several neighbors argue that the boys are discriminated against, because of their Moroccan background; and that this makes it difficult for them to find a job or, if they are at school, even an internship (a work placement). One of the neighbors shares a personal experience that is intended to prove that Moroccan people are discriminated against:

I'll tell you a nice story. This is really true what happened here. It is about a boy, a Moroccan boy who I coach a bit in finding work. There was this advertisement in the local newspaper. I said: boy, you should call. He called, mentioning his name, Ali B. Hupsalakee. The answer was: no, we do not have any job now. I'll tell you. Ten minutes later, I call another time. This is Torenstra [a very Dutch name], I just read this advertisement in the newspaper, can I apply for it? When can you drop by? is what they said. Yeah, this has really happened.

And a woman argues:

> It is of course a multiproblem. I mean, if the boys, if somebody is not given an internship, what else can he do, because they cannot go to school because they have no internship and thus they are hanging around on the street, because what else should they do? Without a diploma they will not find work. So, they are caught in a sort of vicious circle.

It can be concluded that the neighbors do not explain the problem by mentioning one or a few causes. Instead, different causes on different levels and with different scales are mentioned as contributing to the problem of youngsters of Moroccan background hanging around at the square and annoying other people. It is clear that the neighbors condemn the behavior of the boys, but do not hold them as a matter of course accountable for their behavior, nor do they hold themselves accountable. Instead, accountability is shifted by emphasizing that the problem is complex because different actors and different mechanisms at different levels play a role.

The Youngsters

On being asked how they felt about the conflict, the youngsters we spoke to started arguing that there is no problem at or with the square:

> It doesn't make any sense. People are really exaggerating, nothing happens.

They emphasize that their hanging out at the square is completely innocent. They just like to meet in the street:

> It is varied. Outside is where it happens! You can look around. And, yes, people pass by.

During the interviews a few admit that sometimes things happen, but, by arguing that these are exceptions, they play the problem down:

A There are a few boys, maybe three or four, who burgle a bit.

B Yeah, but this is normal.

C Yeah, that is society. I mean, in every box of apples you can find a rotten one. It is always like that.

In explaining that the problem is exaggerated, the boys deploy both identity frames and characterization frames, as shown in the next remarks:

> Although most of us are in school or have a job, we gather after five or six, just catching up, and then we're seen as criminals straightaway.

And:

> Because we're standing on the corner in a group. When someone passes by, he immediately sees us as the others, robbers as we were called the other day. We are considered to be robbers, whereas we have jobs and are in school.

In phrases such as: "Although most of us are in school or have a job, because we're standing on the corner in a group, we are considered to be robbers, whereas we have jobs and are in schools," the boys construct an identity frame of innocence. At the same time, the neighbors are characterized as people who stigmatize ("We're seen as criminals straightaway and we're considered as robbers, whereas most of us are in school or have a job.").

While discussing the problem, the boys, as also the neighbors, mention different causes at different levels. At the square level, the boys state that "bad boys" do what they want because *they don't take the Dutch policy officers seriously*. In their opinion, the police should act more clearly, more consistently, and more strictly. A connection to the Moroccan culture is made by explaining that "good" Moroccan boys are not supposed to betray the "bad" ones:

> We're all Moroccans and we're not supposed to betray each other. We would be in big trouble if we did that.

Also at square level, the lack of an accessible indoor place is mentioned as an important cause of the problem:

> Most of us are outside with friends, because we can't go anywhere: there isn't a community center, there is nowhere to go to.

Just like the neighbors, the youngsters do not accept any accountability for the problem at issue. Others cause or even construct the problem. Discrimination and stigmatization is frequently mentioned as an important cause of the problem, not only at square level but also at the level of Dutch society. They argue that they are continuously approached in a negative way (*we're seen as criminals straightaway*) and, in addition to that, they feel excluded, not only from the labor market but also from public places such as discotheques, as is stated in the next instance:

> You know what the problem is: Here in this city we are not accepted, nowhere. Not in one discotheque. We are refused everywhere, every weekend. What else can we do than hang around outside? And then the police come: yeah, nuisance this and that. While we are not accepted anywhere in this city.

The way the issue is formulated, the use of strong language (*nowhere, everywhere, every week*) shows the frustration of the speaker, paving the way for a self-fulfilling prophecy attitude, justifying (and thus implicitly admitting!) annoying behavior (Merton, 1948), as illustrated by the next statement by one of the boys:

> We're seen as criminals anyway, so let us just act like that.

It can be concluded that neighbors and youngsters deploy different frames concerning the conflict. Whereas the neighbors talk about nuisance and impudence, the youngsters emphasize that they are doing nothing but hanging around at the square. Both neighbors and youngsters look outside themselves for the causes of the phenomenon of "Moroccan youngsters hanging around at the square." At square level, the other party is supposed to be the problem. Youngsters argue that neighbors should neither exaggerate nor stigmatize; neighbors in their turn would like the youngsters not to annoy or threaten them. At a higher level, the neighbors lay the responsibility for solving the problem at the door of the municipal authorities by urging for a redesign of the square, providing it with more streetlights and making it less cluttered. Both neighbors and youngsters ask for more prominent action on the part of police officers and agree upon the need for an indoor space. Besides these local considerations, the conflict is related to a more general problem of Moroccan youngsters who are discriminated against, and socially as well as spatially excluded from Dutch society.

On the assumption that conflicts arise and develop based on the meaning and interpretation people attach to events and actions in which they are involved (Pinxten & Verstraete, 1998), it can be concluded that the apparently local context in which the conflict between neighbors and youngsters emerges has a broader basis. The analysis of the frames deployed by the interviewees uncovers relations with dominant discourses and other phenomena and developments as well. The conflict between youngsters and neighbors at the square can thus be characterized as a complex, hard-to-solve problem because different actors and different scales are involved in complex, nonlinear ways.

Legitimizing Frames in Different Relational Contexts

We continue by analyzing how frames with regard to the conflict are legitimized in different conversation contexts. We make a distinction between conversations with the we-groups (neighbors or youngsters) and conversations with both youngsters and neighbors.

Conversations with We-Groups. In the conversations with we-groups, we found that the parties involved use several strategies to legitimize the frames they deploy. These strategies are: (a) presenting personal experiences; (b) looking for support; (c) stereotyping and stigmatizing; and (d) using disclaimers.

The first strategy is found in recounting personal experiences, as is the case in the following conversation between neighbors:

> N1 Saturday night we had a bingo night. The woman walks out of the porch, she is over 80 years old. One boy from the square comes and pulls her down stretched out on the street. I had this experience some three weeks ago: [...] I walk home with a bag, with my laptop and my normal bag. We talked a little more on the corner, a scooter comes, I was

so lucky, I wore my bag like this over my shoulder. I think they knew, because they came real close, but I turned away, so the bag was gone, they drove by and then they looked. I was lucky, because they were about to pull that bag out of my hands.

N2 Yes, in front of this door!

N3 I had the same experience last year or the year before. I was riding my bicycle carrying my bag. They were just acquaintances, who...

N1 Yes, they don't care a hoot about that.

N2 But they didn't see it was me. I thought: gosh, he's touching my bag. They drove by and I had my bag, but they couldn't get it, but I arrived and there they stood. I got off my bike and said: What did you intend? No ma'am, truly not. You were touching my bag, weren't you? No, I hit it by accident. I said: you better be careful. You shouldn't have tried that on me, because I would have fallen off my bike. I said: you could have tried, but I wouldn't leave it like that.

In this conversation, credibility is constructed by referring to personal experiences that cannot be denied without accusing the speaker of being a liar which, of course, will not often occur. Within discursive psychology, the strategy of constructing credibility by reporting the concrete circumstances in a detailed way is well-known (Te Molder & Potter, 2005). The remarks above also show a second strategy for creating credibility, namely, looking for support from the other conversation partners. When people are not sure of their own frames, or feel the need for another or a stronger legitimacy, they start looking for confirmation from the other participants of the conversation, as happens in the next quotation:

N1 And dealing in drugs, because they stood there in the parking lot opposite the church and they just deal drugs.

N2 And that still happens, *doesn't it C*[1]?

Stories evoke other stories, strengthening the shared acceptance of the we-group's existing frames. The added stories demonstrate that the participants in the conversation recognize the presented frame (*they try to rob you*). The social process of constructing stereotypes and gossip starts with people legitimizing each other's frames within the we-group. By repeating, strengthening, and adding to each other's claims, frames become frozen, with the result that they become absolutely true for the people of the we-group and therefore are put forward in no matter what context. Such frames are expressed in stereotyping,

1 All italics in reported speech have been applied by the authors

stigmatizing, or literally repeating arguments in different situations (Gray, 2003; Aarts & van Woerkum, 2006).

The third strategy has to do with prejudices, stereotypes and stigmas. Within the "we-group," people frequently talk in terms of "us" and "them." In terms of frames, people in we-groups construct identity frames for themselves and characterization frames for the others. By using these frames, people position themselves against others or in the wider social context. This strategy follows from the first, since certain personal experiences have been repeated within the group and in the end are internalized by the whole group, resulting in frames that are commonly shared within the we-group, again resulting in frozen frames. Look, for example, at the next statement of one of the youngsters who uses stereotypes to indicate how they think others frame them:

According to *those people* we are one big bunch of criminals: *We all* steal, *we all* rob. Whereas *all of us* have to get up at seven to earn our living.

And in the next part of a conversation between youngsters, a stereotype of Dutch people is constructed as follows:

Y1 ... ah *man*, what bothers *them*? *They* live three blocks away from the square! If you live on the square, surely you have some nuisance.

Y2 But *those people* are already annoyed when *they* look out their window and see three boys, then it's nuisance straight away. Whereas the boys are only talking.

Y1 With *Dutch people* it's like this, that's my experience: what the neighbor says, I will repeat. That is the way it is with *Dutch people*.

In this instance, we again recognize the youngsters supporting and strengthening each other's frames. Y1 states that it is not just the people who live on the square that complain, but even the people living further away. Y2 reacts to that by saying that the people living on the square immediately start to complain when they see the boys appearing on the square. This evokes Y1's reaction that all Dutch people repeat what their neighbors say.

The neighbors in their turn also construct stigmas for Moroccan people in their conversation, as the next remarks show:

Things go wrong with *the Moroccans* as soon as *they* leave primary school. You just see it. *They* go to high school and...there's less supervision or something, but then you see *they* really start with crime.

The construction of a commonly shared stigma empowers the we-group, because the people within the "we-group" all agree with each other. This agreement results in a collective fantasy about the others and the problem at

stake, providing a clear, clarifying story. As Pepper (1995) argues, group fantasizing allows the group to develop a shared understanding and a basis for reasoning and action. Furthermore, the collective fantasy about the others legitimizes their aversion of the others and, as a result, serves as a powerful weapon within the "we-group" (Elias & Scotson, 1994; Pepper, 1995), providing a base for "bonding" social capital that enables people to "get by" (MacDonald, Shildrick, Webster, & Simpson, 2005: 884).

Within the "we-group," stereotypes, stigmas and frozen frames are repeated and strengthened all the time, and, since there is barely any communication with the other group, such frozen frames are hardly ever corrected or nuanced. As Ford argues, the accumulated mass of continuity and consistency maintains and objectifies reality (Ford, 1999: 484).

The current communication between the youngsters and neighbors is almost always conflict-related. Former research shows that, in conflict-related communication, existing identity and characterization frames are more likely to be confirmed than invalidated (Aarts, 1998). One could think, for example, of the boys who suggest that the neighbors see them all as criminals. When a neighbor walks up to them to tell them he does not appreciate their behavior, the boys' frame (*they consider us all to be criminals*) is confirmed. Such confirmation is constructed and strengthened in we-group conversations wherein they probably search for support and for consensus, which is especially the case in situations of perceived threat.

A fourth strategy is the construction of an identity frame in such a way that it legitimizes deployed frames that might be socially less acceptable. In discursive psychology this strategy is known as using disclaimers (Te Molder & Potter, 2005). Examples are statements like "I don't discriminate, but...." or the next conversation between neighbors:

A *We also used to hang around, but* we didn't play any naughty tricks.

B No, that is true, but we could...

A Well, we did play naughty tricks, *but only nice naughty tricks.*

C Yeah, but this is just committing burglary.

Before accusing the youngsters of committing burglary, the neighbors present themselves as persons who do know what naughty tricks are, who themselves used to play naughty tricks as well, and therefore are able to distinguish between naughty tricks and committing burglary.

Summarizing, we can state that people while communicating within the we-group employ several specific strategies to legitimize and strengthen the frames they create and deploy. In the communication within the we-group, the problem and the "enemy" are constructed with the help of stereotypes, stigmas and frozen frames.

Us Together with Them

During the research, we invited neighbors and youngsters to discuss the problem together. Observing and analyzing the interactions, we found three dominant strategies for legitimizing the frames that the participants deploy in this specific context: (a) searching for a shared problem and a shared enemy, (b) talking about solutions instead of problems, and (c) discussing the problem with a lot of cautiousness.

Firstly, opponents in interaction (in the presence of the researchers as facilitators of the conversation), instead of focusing on each other's contribution to the conflict as they did in the conversation within the we-groups, now start looking for a shared problem and enemy as shown in the following instances:

And the problems lie purely, not with the boys, but *with the municipality.*
And:

N1 *That police officer* should just tell those boys: I am watching you! Done.

N2 *He* should be more clear?

N1 *He* should be more clear, *he* should have authority, *he* should just say: I am watching you!

N3 But there is absolutely no authority.

N1 Yes and *they* come and *they* pick them up and *they* bring them to the station: they drink coffee together, fill out a form.

Y1 And then *they*'ll bring you back.

N1 Yes, *they* return and *the police officers* think: I don't want to have too much trouble, or I don't know what's going on. So *he* starts discussing with the same bunch of youngsters that *they* picked up earlier that day. Then I state: You shouldn't ask why you don't have any authority. If I were a police officer, I would say to those boys: I am keeping my eye on you and then I would drive on!

The latter quote not only illustrates how a third party is made accountable, it also shows how the frame: "the police don't have any authority" is constructed in interaction. The police are stereotyped in this fragment. More generally, we found that in interaction the opponents do not stereotype or stigmatize each other, instead they start looking for a (new) common enemy, in this case the police and the municipality. With the phrase: "If I were a police officer, I would say to those boys: I am keeping my eye on you and then I would drive on," another thing is done: a norm is set about the way these boys should be treated. With the same phrase an identity frame is presented of the

self as a reasonable person, obeying the norm that is constructed by the speaker at the same moment, but presented and accepted as *the* norm.

Secondly, searching for corresponding problem and solution frames, both youngsters and neighbors try to deploy certain frames, which apparently are of importance to them, although these frames are presented with much more cautiousness than was the case in the conversations with the we-groups. The participants do this by avoiding talking about the problem. Instead, they talk about a solution that they assume that the opponents will welcome. A couple of the neighbors and the youngsters continuously raise the question of the need to create an indoor space for the youths. One of the boys:

> But in the end, if a space is made available for the youths, let's be honest, they will calm down.

And a neighbor:

> But don't you think, about that school building option for an indoor space for the youths, don't you think there will be far less crime in the neighborhood?

The problem is only named in fits and starts. One by one, different aspects are mentioned. When the researchers ask what the problem is about, the people mostly start talking about the school building being a nice indoor place for the boys. In answer to the researchers' insistence that they name the problem, the neighbors bring up dirt as a problem, noise is mentioned, crime is cautiously referred to several times, but in the meantime over and over again people keep coming back to the solution of the school building or another place where the youngsters could hang out.

When talking about the problem, the neighbors present their problem frame in a construction that legitimizes the problem frame. In the next quotation, we can recognize the strategy of accusing the other without taking responsibility for what is being said:

> ...*But what I hear from my neighbors* is that it's actually about groups of youngsters that are too large and too loud. If someone passes by and the conversation stops, the person is stared at, people feel a particular tension. *And that doesn't apply only to the Moroccans, but is true for all youths.*

Two strategies are combined here. The phrase: "*but what I hear from my neighbors*" aims at shifting accountability for the remark. Emphasizing that "*that doesn't apply only to the Moroccans, but is true for all youths*'" prevents an accusation of discrimination or stigmatization.

Another strategy to legitimize a frame that might be confrontational, insulting, discriminatory, or in another way socially unacceptable, as we have already seen in the conversations with the we-groups, is the use of a disclaimer by constructing a specific identity frame, before deploying another (characterization) frame:

> ...*well, I am really good with these boys*, because I've never had any trouble [...] Look, I just see, *and that's not to discriminate*, but I think these boys don't have any coziness at home.

It is clear that the participants do not want the conflict to escalate. One explanation may be that people in general dislike social disapproval. Here, we recognize Goffman (1959), who argues that people in interaction, be it consciously or not, are continually regulating the impression they make. In common interaction, people are polite, they behave themselves in a socially acceptable way. Irrespective of their goals, most people prefer an amiable, relaxed, and conflict-free interaction to one which is unfriendly, saturated with tension, and conflict ridden (Berger & Bradac, 1982). This may result in handling relationships carefully in interaction, as we found in the conversation between neighbors and youngsters.

Conclusion and Discussion

Many conflicts in public space *seem* to be local problems that should consequently be analyzed and solved at the local level. Our analysis of the square conflict at the interaction level, however, has uncovered relations with dominant discourses and macro-institutional phenomena and developments, leading to the conclusion that the conflict is not restricted to what actually happens at the square. In conversations with various actors involved, different scales not only become apparent but are also interconnected, and therefore define the conflict. This makes the conflict a complex one, characterized by the involvement of different actors with different problem definitions and different backgrounds, as well as by the fact that it stretches across many levels (Aarts & van Woerkum, 2002). Such conflicts are not likely to be solved merely at the local level; nor does pointing at linear cause-consequence chains and, in line with this, simple means-end planning result in a solution of the conflict (Coleman, 2006). Instead, more structural change should be pursued by creating preconditions for changing the discourses at various levels. This is a much more complex problem-solving process! However, if the complexity of the problem is not recognized, it will be very hard to solve it.

Further, this study shows that both youngsters and neighbors place alternating emphases on different relational contexts. Communication within the

"we-groups" is characterized by a lot of stereotyping and stigmatizing, resulting in divergence and distancing. In interaction with the opponent, specific discursive strategies are used with the objective of maintaining the relationship and preventing escalation and thus resulting in convergence.

Our study does not make clear what the impact is of the narrowing of the gap that was noticed in the conversation between neighbors and youngsters. A connection can be made with the theory of politeness as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) showing what "face-work" looks like in textual communication. The starting point of this theory is the idea of Ervin Goffman who argues that people in interaction with other people tend to save face by applying different forms of face-work (Goffman, 1959). This would imply that the convergence resulting from the conversation will not be very sustainable because it serves goals that are directly connected to the interaction at that very moment. More conversations between both parties in which the problem is discussed are probably needed. The immediate focus was on a physical solution to the problem: organizing an indoor space for the boys. One might wonder whether this is a sufficient solution to the problem since different phenomena and developments on different scales contribute to the problem, such as unemployment and discrimination, constantly reaffirmed in dominant discourses at street level, as well at national and even transnational levels. It is the fundamental problem of inclusion and exclusion that becomes manifest in the frames that are constructed in the different interaction contexts. This problem is difficult to manage because it is constructed in different interaction contexts at different scales that seem to reinforce each other, resulting in dominant patterns that are hard to change.

Nevertheless, starting again from the assumption that reality is constructed through conversation, our study suggests that organized communication may support the de-escalation of the conflict. One could think of organizing encounters between youngsters and neighbors on a regular basis, so that the mutual approach and convergence of talk will become more sustainable. Since it is very difficult for people who have a direct stake in the conflict to organize such encounters as well as to reframe without the help of a neutral third party, it seems wise to involve communication professionals. These professionals could, in addition, talk with both the youngsters and the neighbors separately and reflect with them on how stereotyping and stigmatizing is constructed by means of talk among "peers," resulting in enlarging the distance between the conflicting parties. Finally communication professionals, working at this local level, could try to link up to similar discussions at other places and at higher levels with the aim at changing the background conversations that feed the stereotyping and stigmatizing at the different local levels (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002). This may all help to gradually put the identity frames and

characterization frames that reinforce the conflict into perspective and to bring the conflict back to the issue at stake: the common use of public space.

What have not been discussed at all are the various functions of public space. Especially for young people, public space provides the possibility to fulfill important needs such as "on the one hand, to withdraw from the adult world to one's own peers; on the other hand, to meet and confront the adult world, to put oneself on display, and to see and be seen" (Lieberg, 1995: 740). Hanging out can thus be considered as fulfilling the desire to publicly display and advertise difference in lifestyle (Lieberg, 1995; Simpson, 2000; Sennett, 1990; see also Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001). Moreover, it is in public spaces that different identities and different cultures meet (Van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008). We agree with Hajer and Reijndorp (2001) who suggest that public space, for that very reason, fulfills an important role in increasing the social cohesion in society and as such makes a contribution to a social, democratic society. Looking from such a broader perspective at the importance of public space suggests the need to develop new and different visions of the city where both the design and use of public space are given greater significance (Lieberg, 1995).

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